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# In the Neutral Ground

Willard Barrows

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## In the Neutral Ground

[Willard Barrows, a surveyor with a gift for writing, came to Davenport in 1837. In 1845 he published a handbook called *Notes on Iowa Territory with a Map*. In 1859 appeared his valuable *History of Scott County*. The following account is taken from a collection of his reminiscences preserved in a volume, now very rare, published by William Barrows in 1869 under the title *Twelve Nights in the Hunter's Camp*.—THE EDITOR.]

In 1839 I was employed in the survey of the public lands in Iowa, on what was called The Black Hawk Purchase. This new acquisition was then being settled up with great rapidity.

In 1840 I undertook for government the survey of the islands in the Mississippi, between the mouth of Rock River and Quincy. It was a work of great difficulty and hardship. These islands had been surveyed several times by other parties, but their work was so incorrect that the government rejected it. Mine was the last one made. It was commenced early in the spring, amid floating ice and high water, and in rough weather. It was necessary to extend the section lines from the mainland to the islands, and then meander the islands. Of course the party were compelled to be much in the water, and, as a consequence, there was much sickness among them, as well as delay in the work. But I completed it that season, and in a manner satisfactory to the government.



Falling readily into the custom of frontier men, I joined a party of seven, in the fall of this year, to go on a hunting expedition into the Indian country. The outfit consisted of horse and ox teams, with tents, blankets, provision, and, in this case, with barrels, as we intended to take wild honey. It was not usual for hunters to go far beyond the settlements at that early day; but our company was made up of men not only fond of the chase, but anxious to explore a region so much talked of, and not unwilling to have exciting adventures.

The company set forth about the first of September, and, following the dividing ridge between the Cedar and the Wabessapinecon Rivers, were some seven days in reaching the grounds on which they intended to hunt, a tract between the head-waters of these two rivers.

The constant broils between the Sacs and Foxes and the Sioux, whose lands adjoined, induced the government in 1828 [1830] to cut off a strip of land twenty miles wide on each side of the dividing line between the tribes, making forty miles of territory in width, running from the Mississippi River above Prairie du Chien, to the Des Moines, a distance of about one hundred and fifty miles. This strip of land neither party could use for hunting purposes, and was called The Neutral Grounds.

When the Winnebagoes sold their lands in Wisconsin, they were removed to these Neutral Grounds, being at peace with the Indians on both sides. The



Winnebagoes were in possession of these lands at the time our party went on this hunt.

When we arrived near the boundary line of the Indians, we encamped, and for many days enjoyed the sports of the chase, and took some honey. Here we waited till the Indians should start on their journey to Prairie du Chien to receive their annuity from government, which we knew was to be paid about this time. We also knew that their absence was the only time when we could hunt and gather honey on these Neutral Grounds with any safety.

We were accordingly ready to remove to the scene of operations as soon as the Indians left. We did so at the earliest opportunity, and camped on what we called Honey Creek, a small stream within the Neutral Grounds. Not far from the camp was a white oak grove, on a rise of land. The trees were large and old, and many of them hollow, and on a half mile square of this grove we found sixteen bee trees. Other game was plenty, and we enjoyed ourselves during one of those delightful Indian summers, so much admired in the West.

We felt secure so long as the Winnebagoes were away. We had no right on their lands without their permission, or that of the Indian agent; and when whites were caught hunting or fishing there, their property was considered by the Indians as lawful prize.

We had completed our hunt, having strained the honey and put it in casks, jerked the meat, and got it



ready to pack, and prepared everything for a homeward move, except the trying out of a large quantity of beeswax. It was late in the afternoon when some of the party, who had been out hunting, came into camp and reported Indians in the vicinity. Scouts being sent out, several were seen, and one even came into camp, and viewed the rich store of meat and honey that we had taken. He was grave and severe, and refused food, which fact we all understood painfully well. He left, and we sent a spy to watch him. When some distance from camp, he put spurs to his horse, and went at full speed across the prairie.

It was now well understood that the Indians had returned from the agency, and that we might expect a visit from them about daylight the next morning, the time when all tribes are wont to open their attacks on an enemy. The hunting party put their arms in order, and determined on defence, if the enemy should not prove to be too numerous. All hands were now engaged in packing and loading the wagons preparatory to a retreat. The barrels of honey were loaded in, the oxen and horses gathered and tied near by in the bush, for fear that the intentions of the party to depart might be discovered by some Indian spy. The company had taken eight barrels of strained honey, besides much elk and deer meat.

Waiting for the rising of the moon, and then building a large camp fire, we hitched up our teams, and placing a rear guard and pilot, we started for home. After much trouble and a few miles' travel, we



struck the trail where we entered, and about daylight we passed safely the boundary line. About the same time, probably, the Indians were visiting our old camping-ground to rob us of our booty. These same Indians had robbed trappers and explorers the fall preceding, and they were disposed, on all safe occasions, to appropriate the effects of the white man to their own use. But they gave us no difficulty, and we arrived home in safety, and well laden with game and honey.

In 1841-2, the public surveys being suspended, I turned my attention to a more full exploration of the territory that had been cut off from Wisconsin, and called Iowa. At this time there had not been any maps or sketches of the country lying north of the State of Missouri, and between the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers.<sup>1</sup> Major Lee [Lieutenant Lea], of the United States army, had made a tour, with dragoons, up the Des Moines, and Nicholat [Nicollet] had traversed the north-west on both sides of the Mississippi, by order of Congress, and made some outlines and topography of the country. But there was nothing reliable, or what could give one a tolerable idea of the region between the two rivers. The vague and romantic story of the trapper was all that the people of the frontier knew of the region.

These wild adventurers gave the most glowing accounts of its beautiful groves of timber, its swift-flowing rivers, and its broad-rolling prairies, its glassy lakes, with pebbled shores, and abundance of

<sup>1</sup> A good map had been published by Colton in 1839.— THE EDITOR.



fish, and its immense herds of buffalo, elk, and deer, that roamed at will over the delightful wilds. But they could give no great landmarks, or inland seas, by which the traveller could direct his course.

At the instance of Governor Chambers, of the then new Territory of Iowa, and the solicitation of the surveyor general of the North-west, I undertook the exploration of the territory, and at my own charges. With two men and a proper outfit, I set forth, in the autumn of 1841, to sketch the country and make a map of the same, as far north as the forty-third degree, the present southern boundary of Minnesota. In this work I was engaged a portion of the time for three years, making annual excursions, tracing the rivers to their sources, and marking the timber lands, living the while mostly on game.

The Indian title at this time was extinguished to only a small part lying along the Mississippi River. The rest was inhabited by the Sacs and Foxes, the Potawatamies, and the Winnebagoes. In my first trip I followed up the ridge between the Cedar and the Wabessapinecon Rivers to the boundary line of the Neutral Grounds, on which the Winnebagoes resided. Here I established my headquarters for the winter, and built a depot for my supplies. It was located on a small creek, in a deep and densely-wooded glen, a few miles from the Wabessapinecon, and just within the line between the Indians and the whites. This was about the first of September, and the chief of the band who lived on this portion of the



Neutral Grounds, and whose village was only about six miles away, had gone with the most of his braves and great men to Prairie du Chien. No communication, therefore, could be had with him till his return, which would be a month or more. Portions of his people were encamped near by, on their fall hunt, and came often to my camp. In this band were some young men and boys who had attended the Mission School at Fort Atkinson, on Turkey River, established and maintained by the government.

It is a characteristic of the Indian never to speak English, even if he can, unless sheer necessity compels him, or when he is sure his people will not know it. It is considered a kind of disgrace, as if he were tinctured with civilization, and were apostatizing from the dignity of his fathers, and becoming a white man.

I had learned some Winnebago words from the Sacs and Foxes, some of whom spoke it, though the two languages are quite unlike. As I could not proceed across the Indian country till Chas-chun-ka (Big Wave) returned, I set my men to hunting and storing away provisions for the winter, while I attempted to gain a sufficient knowledge of the language to enable me to travel intelligently among them. It was always necessary for one to remain in camp to prevent Indian depredations, and to keep the horses from straying. This duty I now took on myself, and encouraged the Indian boys, who frequently visited the camp, to be familiar, giving them presents of



red cloth and ribbons, bread and pork, of which they are very fond, and other trifles of civilization.

They soon became familiar, answering promptly the questions I put them, as to the names of things. One day, what were my surprise and delight, when I inquired of a sprightly lad, about twelve years of age, and who had come into the cabin alone, what he called the victuals that were then cooking in the kettle, to hear him answer in plain, unbroken English, "Why, it is pork and beans, and I shall want some bread and potatoes to eat with them when they are done." His dark, keen eye twinkled with the answer, and he burst into a fit of laughter, half hiding his face through shame that he knew so much of the white man's language.

He saw my delight at discovering his knowledge, and yielded freely to the questions, where, and how, and when he obtained the English so perfectly. He had been a pupil in the Mission School of the Rev. David Lowry for five or six years, and could read as well as speak English quite fluently. When I applied to him to teach me, nothing could exceed his unwillingness, even to interpret. But my close familiarity and gentleness, and presents for himself and mother, whose lodge was about a mile distant, won him over, and he proved of great value, not only in teaching me, but in shielding me from dangers afterwards.

The return of Chas-chun-ka, about the first of November, was speedily heralded through the Indian



camps, and I was notified by my friendly and faithful little mission boy, who, by this time, knew all my desires and plans.

The chief was, like the most of his race, vain and conceited, puffed up with self-importance, but susceptible of flattery, and fond of presents. He was not an hereditary chief, but a Fox by birth, and having joined the Winnebagoes at an early age, he had risen to his present position by the force of native talent. He was worth some property in horses and presents, given him by the agents and officers of the government. He had two wives, and was about to take a third; but as the winter was near, and provisions scarce, he had concluded to wait till spring.

He was duly notified of my presence in the country, and my wish to hold a conference with him at my tent whenever his chieftainship would please to signify his willingness. Early one morning, a few days after his return, a cavalcade was seen coming across the prairie towards my camp. In due time, and in long Indian file, they drew up around my cabin. I remained inside to receive the distinguished guests, while his officials motioned to the Indians, as they dismounted, to enter the council.

There were twelve or more under-chiefs and braves who accompanied Chas-chun-ka. He entered first, bowing and shaking hands with me. This salutation was repeated by the whole troop. They then seated themselves around the cabin, on the ground, but their chief on a bench. The appearance of the



chief was very surprising to me, for I had expected to see a profusion of paint and feathers, and wampum of costly texture. Instead of that, he was clothed in a buffalo overcoat, a stove-pipe hat, and wore a pair of green spectacles. His belt was probably the gift of a soldier, as it bore the U. S. in front. His outfit had all probably been given to him by some traders at the fort.

I addressed him politely as he entered, but I did not at first regard him as the chief. On pronouncing his name, he bowed, and, as I supposed by his dress that he must be a half-breed, and could speak English, I addressed him in that tongue, but he would make no response. Still believing that it was only Indian policy and custom not to know English, I pressed the point in broken Indian; but a persistent protest of silence in Chas-chun-ka compelled me to send for my little teacher and mission boy, Wabessawawa (White Goose). He came trembling and abashed before the sachem and his warriors, and, as he passed the chief, the latter patted him on the head, and said some approving word, that caused the boy to smile.

The council was opened as usual with the pipe and the shaking of hands. Then all were seated again, and looked to me to make known my business. I arose, and after telling them of my long residence at Assinni-Manness [Rock Island], with their friends, the Sacs and Foxes, and of my labors for their Great Father, the President, in surveying the lands he



bought of them, I told them I had come to see their country by the request of their Father. Then I showed them the passport given me by General Chambers, and told the chief that I wanted to go across his country and make a picture of it for the president.

After hearing me and examining my maps and sketches taken on the way up, some of which he corrected — for the Indian is a topographical draughtsman by nature — he handed the papers back and shook his head. Looking around on his warriors with an air of kingly importance, he directed the interpreter to tell me that he could not let me go over his lands for any such purpose. He said he well knew the object of his Great Father in sending me there to make a picture of his country; that if it was good for the white he would buy it, but if not the Indian could keep it. No, I could not go. After many entreaties and presents to induce him to yield, I found it of no use, and the council broke up. This was a difficulty that I had not anticipated, and all my plans seemed liable to fail.

The next day I visited him with one of my men in his lodge at the village. He was affable and polite, but rather cool, and when the subject of explorations was introduced he became silent and morose. I therefore left him, determined to visit Fort Atkinson and see the Winnebago agent.

It had now become late in the season, and there was great danger in traversing an unknown country



at such an inclement season without a guide or trail. Moreover, I should be subject to the watchful eye of the Indians, and if the chief found I had left, he would send his warriors and bring me back. But I was not to be baffled in my plans, and give up my project without a struggle. I was not afraid of the Indian, for I knew that I was regarded as an agent of the government, and so no harm must come to me in his territory. I would not ask the chief for a guide, or even let him know of my intentions of visiting the agency, as it was on Indian territory, to which I had already been refused access.

I therefore set out early one morning, with one man and two horses, across the country one hundred and twenty-five miles, for Fort Atkinson, with no map or trail, and with the assurance, almost, that I should be arrested and brought back by the Indians. I knew the course to be about north-west, and expecting to find trails, or see some Indians, when near there, who would direct me to the fort, I entered on the journey. At first I avoided the prairie to escape the vigilance of the Indians. On the second day out a dense fog covered the open country, while it rained in torrents. The streams were so swollen that we were obliged to swim them with our horses. When three days out, and near night, it cleared up, the fog rolled off, and it turned cold. We steered for a grove in sight, which we reached just at dark, and to our surprise found there the ashes of our morning camp fire. We had wandered in the fog all day at good speed to come back there for the night.



The next morning we put out again, and after a journey of five days more, over wet prairie and swollen streams, we reached the fort. The first night we were entertained within its walls to our full comfort. The agent then provided for us during the ten days that we remained.

While here I visited the Mission School of Mr. Lowry. It contained about sixty scholars of both sexes, many of whom had made good advances in reading and writing English. There was a farm of twelve hundred acres, broken up and fenced, with suitable buildings, all belonging to the agency, and intended to teach the Indians agriculture and the arts of civilized life. But they could not be made to work. Government paid for the labor of eight men; but few Indians would go into the fields to work.

Mr. Lowry gave me a passport to go over the lands of the Winnebagoes: and he also wrote a letter to Chas-chun-ka, telling him what a great and good chief he was, and that he had always been friendly to the white man, and that now he must permit me to cross his lands whenever I pleased, and that by so doing he would not only please him, but his Great Father.

I returned, and, taking Wabessa-wawa to read the letter, I rode over to the lodge of the chief and presented him the papers given me by the agent. When the letter was read, it flattered his vanity so much that he sent for the chiefs and braves, and had the same read to them. When it spoke of his greatness



and goodness he would look around on his men with a proud and haughty air, as if to say, "Behold your chief, and hear what the white man says of him." His whole being seemed at once changed, and he told me that I might go all about over his country, and that he would send men with me.

The next day he came over to see me, and of course to get some presents. He wanted me to wait for him two weeks or so, when he would go with me. I did so, but seeing no preparation by him for such a trip, I started without him. My route lay up the Wabessapinecon to its head and down the Cedar.

During my absence the Indians, many of them, had removed, and among them, greatly to my regret, had gone the lodge of my little interpreter, Wabessawawa. I could get no information which way he had gone, only that he left with his people for a hunt.

After recruiting myself and horses, I again started towards the head-waters of the Des Moines. I had not passed the Neutral Grounds, when one day we came on an encampment of Winnebagoes, who seemed boisterous and much disposed to plunder, pulling the packs from the horses, and demanding bread and meat. Their rudeness was observed by the old men of the tribe, but they said nothing, till I went to one of them, and, addressing him in his own tongue, I told him I was the friend of Chas-chun-ka, and the agent of the government, and that I had a pass from Mr. Lowry, and that they must not allow their young braves to do such things. In a moment



he spoke to the rude fellows, telling them who I was, when they left the stores, but with evident reluctance and disappointment. On making inquiry for the trail that led to an old trading post on the river, four or five young Indians stepped forward and offered to show me the way. We took their lead, and pursued it for more than a mile, when, on looking back, I saw an Indian boy coming up in great haste. The party came to a halt, and the boy came up, wrapped in his blanket, his face half averted, but with his keen eye fixed on me.

Speaking in a low tone, he said, "You are on the wrong trail. The Indians who sent you here are bad Indians, and they mean to follow and rob you." I pulled the blanket aside, and discovered the pretty face of my Wabessa-wawa. He seemed in much excitement and haste. Requesting me to follow him, he struck off through the woods at a rapid rate, and where there was no path; and after travelling about a mile, he came out into a beaten track. "This," said he, "is your path. I heard you ask for the trail to the old trading-house, and saw those bad Indians put you in the wrong way, and I came to tell you." He would not allow me time to inquire where his lodge was, or where I should see him, if ever, again, nor hardly to untie the pack and give him some biscuit and pork. I did, however, adding some pieces of silver coin. Shaking the little fellow by the hand, I let go of him, and in a few moments he was lost in the thick wood, on his way to the lodge.



Here, thought I, are the fruits of Christianity and the germs of civilization in a savage. This boy had been taught at the Mission School, and, aside from seeing his friend robbed, he knew the wickedness of the deed, and his duty to prevent it. He had the native cunning of his race, and knew how to avoid detection for thwarting the designs of bad men.

We returned in safety from this trip, and once more recruited at our supply camp, or headquarters. Then we made a short excursion towards the Missouri River, but snows had become so deep that travelling was almost impossible. We were three weeks in snow from two to four feet deep. Our usual method in camping was to find a large log, tramp down the snow beside it, pitch the tent, spread down the green hides of elk or deer, and build a good fire. No dampness could penetrate these fresh skins, and so, wrapping ourselves in blankets and buffaloes, we slept soundly.

An Indian trader had come to the same place where we had made our depot, late in the fall, and, among other things, he, as usual, brought whiskey. He had built himself a small trading-house near to us. This served to gather about him large numbers of Indians, and though he managed to deal out his poison with some degree of caution, as a thing forbidden by the government, yet at times a few drunken Indians would be found about the camp. On such occasions I never allowed them in my camp.

On my return from the Missouri River trip I



found the trading-house closed, the Indians drunk, the barrel of whiskey, all that was left of the trader's stock, moved up to my camp, and the clerk there in attendance on it. The trader himself had gone to Dubuque for goods, and left his clerk, a cowardly and effeminate fellow, in charge. The Indians demanded liquor, and to prevent their getting it, he had rolled the barrel to my premises, and left it with my tent-keeper.

It was late in the night when I arrived, and being indignant that it had been placed in my depot, I ordered it out, and it was set outside. But it was too late in the stage of affairs to quell the disturbance. The Indians were already maddened by the beginnings of intoxication, and no persuasion or refusal of the trader's clerk could quiet their demands. I had peremptorily forbidden the sale of any more to them, and the clerk, now finding the trading-house too warm a place for him, closed the doors and took refuge in my tent.

The Indians had threatened to scalp him if he did not produce the liquor, and followed him to my quarters. Here they found the barrel of whiskey outside the door. I spoke to them with firmness, refusing them any more. A portion of them, Chas-chun-ka, and some of his braves, had come inside, and sat in silence around my fire. Some of the chiefs, who knew me well, had come to me in behalf of the whole, pleading for more whiskey. I firmly refused. Being weary from the long and hard march of the day, I



lay down for some rest, ordering my men to keep their arms in readiness, while I placed the heavy hickory fire-poker near me. The Indians were without arms, having deposited them, as usual, with their knives and tomahawks, on the top of the trading-house, and the most of them were too drunk to get them again readily, even if the sober ones would let them. As I lay on my lounge, a large crowd was outside, and ten or fifteen inside.

An old squaw, in order to bring me to terms, had commenced pounding on the head of the whiskey barrel, as it stood near my camp. Big Wave came to me in great pretended alarm, and told me that unless I permitted them to have whiskey, he feared they would break in the head of the barrel, and then all would be drunk, and great trouble would follow. I told him that if he allowed that liquor to be broken open I would kill every Indian within my reach. In the mean time the old squaw kept up her drumming, and as the chief himself disappeared from the doorway, the head of the cask went in!

In a moment I sprang from my bed, caught my walnut poker, a stick five feet long, and cried out to my men, in the Indian language, to kill all in the cabin first. With one stroke I split the table to pieces with a great noise, it being made of the lids of a dry goods box, and continued striking right and left, whooping loud and sharp to my men to kill the chiefs first. The cabin was soon emptied of Indians, and, with those outside, they all took to their heels



like a herd of deer. I had the barrel of whiskey moved inside again, the door barricaded, and quiet restored. Of course no Indian was hurt by us, as my men were under secret instructions to injure no one. The next morning a few came back, and were shown a large place in the snow where the whiskey was deposited, with the barrel bottom up over it. The liquor was confiscated and gone, only an odor remaining in the snow.

An Indian cannot fight with a club, but to him it is a most formidable weapon in the hands of an angry white man. Take from them the gun, tomahawk, and knife, and a resolute man can drive a host of them. When once the Indian has tasted liquor, he does not leave it till drunk, or the liquor gives out. He knows no other use for it, except to produce intoxication. It is not a pleasant beverage to him; he does not like the taste of it; it is only for the effect that he drinks it. His palate is as little vitiated as that of a child. He uses no salt, nor seasoned food, and has a very keen and sensitive taste. I have seen an Indian in apparent agony by the use of whiskey; for the article prepared for their market is often well spiced with red pepper and gums to keep up its strength. And I have seen the young Indian and squaw held by main strength, while whiskey has been administered to them, that they might be taught to drink it.

I returned to Davenport with my party, having accomplished a good work for the season, on my survey for a territorial map. This I finished the next year.